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Doing right by our soldiers

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This is another fine mess you've gotten us into.
Doing right by our soldiers
By Michael L. Coyne and Diane M. Sullivan
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Our fathers were members of "America's greatest generation; each one served his country when it called. Whether on the beaches of Europe in liberation of the concentration camps, or in service to this country for more than 30 years as a member of America's oldest militia, the National Guard, they always answered the call.

The time our families lost because of the scars our soldiers carry -- or because duty calls every weekend and then again during the kids' summer vacations -- was the price we all pay for freedom, we were taught. These were men of courage, integrity, service and, most importantly to them and now us, men of their word.

America must start to do more for our returning wounded men and women. Women often fight our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a record number of these soldiers return badly wounded in need of promised medical care. In tribute to Veterans Day, President Obama stood at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and proclaimed that America will not let veterans and their families down as "America is going to do right by them." So the question, Mr. President, is when? When will America start doing right by its soldiers? Moreover, like America's greatest generation, are you a man of your word?

Too many men and women have gone off in service of their country only to return a futile search for appropriate care for the wounds they sustained, whether they were inflicted by the gunfire of World War II, the bombs of the Korean War, our own Agent Orange of the Vietnam War or now the IEDs of the ragtag wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. America's greatest generation, their children and now grandchildren serve because we ask them to sacrifice their comfort and security for our comfort and security. Don't we owe those that return at least that much?

Visiting the VA hospital in the 1960s left lasting images that will forever stain our memories. The promise of life-long care meant traveling from one side of the city to the other in search of proper medical care. Upon arriving at that imposing building it was hard not to be impressed by the visible symbol of the promise that America would do right by its servicemen and women.

But, promises are easy to make; that simplistic impression however, was quickly shattered. Ward after ward we walked in search of care. Returning Vietnam servicemen and women from the gritty neighborhoods of Boston lined up in bed after bed, perhaps 30 to 40 to a ward, many in visible pain laid in their hospital beds. No sons or daughters of Congressmen waited in those wards. After all, at the end of the day, the poor and middle class fight our wars. It's time we do right by them.

A veteran we know has been hit particularly hard. He was working, and like many of us, just getting along. His meager wages at a fast-food restaurant barely allowed him to keep his head above water and the bill collectors at bay. He knew he would be unable to work much longer as he was losing his increasingly difficult struggle with his disabilities aggravated by the relentless aging process, so he went to SSI to see if he would be eligible for assistance.

Unfortunately, he was told that as long as he was working they would not assess his eligibility for funding; he had to quit his job! But he was afraid to quit because he would have insufficient money to exist. As time marched on this disabled veteran could no longer work. His hands were "crippled up." Additionally, he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder from his time in service to his country. With the assistance of strangers, he began the journey to qualify for benefits.

With no money, no transportation, and limited education he, like so many disabled individuals, found the process overwhelming. Nevertheless, he soldiered on and completed all the necessary paperwork. It was apparent to all who met him that he clearly qualified for benefits, yet months and months later there was still no decision, no money, and no real help. At that point, he was told that unless an individual is homeless, it takes well over a year to process a claim for benefits.

A sad fact in America today is that the great bulk of our nation's homeless -- and a growing number of women -- are indeed our former soldiers. Is that the way this generation wants to be remembered? Is America's greatest generation really those from four generations ago whose accomplishments will never be equaled? Are we willing to accept that?

For a governmental agency to take a position that you must become destitute and homeless before expediting assistance is shameful. Hire more staff and get them working on fulfilling our promises. With billions of dollars of stimulus money being spent on far less worthwhile projects, we can and must do better. It is morally reprehensible to think a veteran must be homeless in the winter in New England or in the scorching heat of the South to get his or her file reviewed and acted upon in a timely manner.

Lucky for our friend, he has friends who have friends whose voices are not as easily ignored. With the help of another serviceman, Sen. John Kerry, the wheels of government bureaucracy moved a bit faster. However, Sen. Kerry can't help everyone; America needs to help.

Instead of spending $6 billion of stimulus money on various university building projects at universities with bloated budgets, shouldn't we do right by our men and women who are still bleeding in service of their country? President Obama, are you a man of your word?

Michael L. Coyne is associate dean of the Massachusetts School of Law in Andover. Diane Sullivan is a professor at the school.